

## Book Reviews

**Sue Ebury, *Weary: the life of Sir Edward Dunlop*, Viking, Ringwood, 1994, ISBN 0 670 847607, viii + 709 pp, \$45.00.**

The outlines of Sir Edward Dunlop's life are probably familiar to many Australians. 'Weary', as he was usually known, was a national hero. Born in Victoria in 1907, he became a brilliant surgeon and an international rugby union player. He served during the Second World War as an Army medical officer in Palestine, Greece, Crete, Tobruk and Egypt before the Japanese captured him in Java in 1942. His care for men working on the infamous Burma to Thailand 'death railway' made him a living legend. After the war he was a pioneer in the treatment of cancer and cared for former prisoners of war. He was also involved in various other community activities. At the time of his death in 1993 he much honoured and held in high regard.

There is, though, another version of Dunlop. At least some of his medical colleagues resented what they claimed was the high-handed way in which he undertook his surgical work. Nor was he always held in great respect among former prisoners of war. Some of the latter, including my father and several of his friends, criticised him for self promotion, arguing that he was just one of many medical officers who did useful work in prison camps.

Sue Ebury is clearly among Dunlop's most ardent admirers. Her huge biography was written with Dunlop's full cooperation. The pace is often breathless and the prose is gushing. Ebury, the New Zealand born wife of a British peer, has no doubt as to her subject's greatness. She acknowledges some deficiencies in his character but argues that these were of minor consequence in comparison with his vast achievements. Dunlop emerges from her pages as a source of inspiration. Not surprisingly, the prison camp years are dealt with in great detail. Dunlop's skills in organising medical services under the most appalling conditions and his constant defiance of his captors quite rightly get special prominence. One can only be impressed at the story of devotion to duty, courage and passion that Ebury relates.

The problem with *Weary* is that its exhaustive and uncritical attention to Dunlop's doings results in the portrait of a man with some pretty unpleasant characteristics and marked flaws of character. In his youth he was an unashamed militarist. While a university student he was involved in physical attacks on other students who did not share his own right wing political views and supported hideous initiation ceremonies at his residential college. Though obviously expert in his chosen profession, he sometimes as a young medical practitioner obviously felt that a boisterous social life was equally important. During the Second World War, both before and after his capture, he took needless risks that placed his own life, and sometimes the lives of others, in jeopardy. Married at the end of the war, he very frequently neglected his wife and family in the years that followed: he spent as much time away from home as he possibly could. He was notorious for his unpunctuality in surgical appointments and his lack of consideration for medical colleagues. He drove his car fast and dangerously. His favourite sports, rugby union and boxing, attracted him due to their 'physical' aspects.

The comments above may appear carping and uncharitable but there is a great deal of detailed evidence in Ebury's book to support them. Dunlop was, of course, a product of the era in which he grew up and a very conservative profession. Many readers of *Weary* will no doubt support Ebury's admiration of this 'man's man'. Others, though, may share my disquiet.

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